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AUTHOR Hitz, Randy; Massoni, Betty
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ABSTRACT

Findings of a recent Oregon Department of Education survey of elementary school principals are reported. In fall, 1988, questionnaires were mailed to 789 elementary school principals in the state. A total of 694 responded. The survey was designed to provide insight into important trends in kindergarten and first grade. The following topics were covered: (1) class size; (2) aide time; (3) number of kindergarten teachers per building; (4) kindergarten schedules; (5) home visits, parent-teacher conferences, and parent volunteers; (6) early entrance policies; (7) retention and transition classrooms; and (8) use of textbooks to teach reading and writing and other curriculum areas. Each of the eight sections of this report includes survey results and a brief commentary citing current national trends and research on the topic in question. Recommendations of the Department's Early Childhood Advisory Committee are also included in each section. (RH)

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Trends in Kindergarten and First Grade

Fall 1989

— Survey Report —

and Recommendations of the
Early Childhood Advisory Committee

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Early Childhood Advisory Committee

**Pat Bedore, Principal
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**Marilyn Campbell, Principal
Salem School District**

**Merrily Haas
Executive Secretary
Oregon Association for the
Education of Young Children**

**Kelly Nash
First Grade Teacher
Ashland School District**

**Jean Neighorn, President
Oregon Association for
Childhood Education
International**

**Mary Ringer, Principal
McMinnville, School District**

**Olga Talley
Director of Head Start
Portland Public Schools**

Consultants

**Christine Chaille
Associate Professor
University of Oregon**

**Rebecca Severeide
Early Childhood Specialist
Portland Public Schools**

**For more information contact
Randy Hitz**

**Division of Special Student Services
Jerry Fuller, Associate Superintendent
Oregon Department of Education
700 Pringle Parkway SE
Salem, Oregon 97310-0290**

SURVEY REPORT ON KINDERGARTEN AND FIRST GRADE

**by
Randy Hitz & Betty Massoni
Specialists, Early Childhood Education**

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to report the findings of a recent Department of Education survey of elementary school principals. The survey was designed to provide insight into important trends in kindergarten and first grade classes. The following specific topics were covered by the survey:

- Class Size**
- Aide Time**
- Number of Teachers**
- Kindergarten Schedules**
- Parent/Teacher Conferences, Home Visits
and Parent Volunteers**
- Transitional Classrooms**
- Early Entrance Policies**
- Use of Textbooks**

In the fall of 1988, questionnaires were mailed to 789 elementary school principals in the state and 478 were returned by the December deadline. Reminder letters were sent in January to principals who had not responded and an additional 216 questionnaires were returned. In all, 694 or 88 percent of the principals responded.

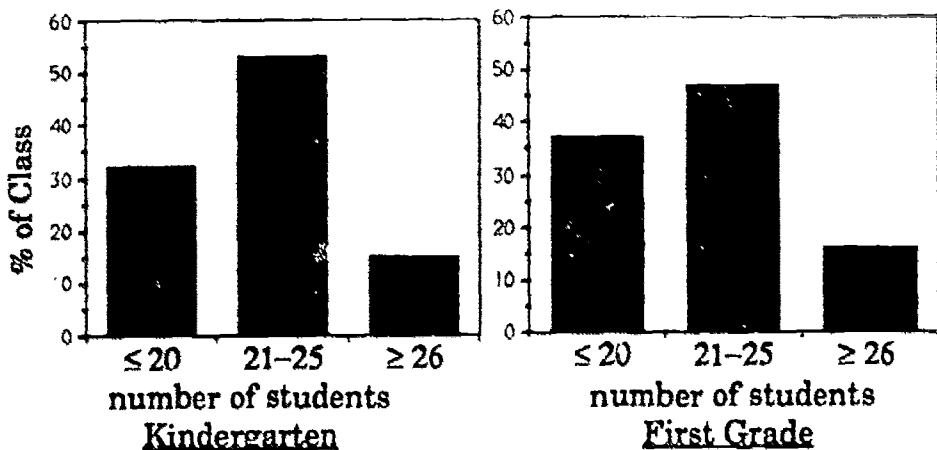
In addition to reporting the survey results, each section of this report includes a brief commentary citing current national trends and research on the topic. Recommendations prepared by the Department's Early Childhood Advisory Committee are also included in each section.

FINDINGS AND COMMENTARY

CLASS SIZE

Principals were asked to list the number of students in each of their kindergarten and first grade classes. Thirty-two percent of the kindergarten classes and 37 percent of first grade classes meet the Department of Education's recommended class size of 20 or fewer students (Kindergarten Issues, 1987). Fifty-three percent of the kindergarten classes and 47 percent of the first grade classes have between 21 and 25 students. Fifteen percent of kindergarten and 16 percent of first grade classrooms have more than 25 students. The median class sizes for kindergarten and first grade are 22.

Research has demonstrated the importance of class size in kindergarten and primary grades (Robinson and Wittebols, 1986). Students in classes with fewer than 20 children tend to do better academically and socially. Nevertheless, a large majority of kindergarten and first grade classes have more than 20 students.



Recommendations

1. Districts should be encouraged to lower their kindergarten and first grade class sizes to 20 or fewer children. To accomplish this, Oregon policymakers should consider

establishing an incentive program similar to Indiana's Prime Time Program. In the Prime Time Program local school districts are given additional money from the state to help them lower the size of their kindergarten and primary classes.

2. The state should consider establishing a special capital construction program to create more elementary school classrooms in districts with a shortage of classrooms so that class sizes can be reduced.

AIDE TIME

Twenty percent of Oregon kindergarten classes have aides for 10-12 hours per week. Fifty percent of Oregon kindergarten classes have aides for seven or fewer hours, representing roughly half-time or less. It is likely that the 10-12 hours represent nearly 100 percent aide time while children are in school but it does not address the need to include classroom aides as part of the instructional team before and after children are present.

The actual aide time and the percentage of aide time are less in first grades than in kindergartens. Sixty percent of first grade classes have five or fewer hours of aide time and 79 percent have ten or fewer hours.

The National Association of State Boards of Education-Early Childhood Task Force (NASBE, 1987) and other organizations recommend that classes for five- to eight-year-olds have no more than 25 children and that two adults be in classes with more than 18 children. Fewer than 20 percent of the kindergartens and even fewer of the first grades in Oregon meet this standard.

Recommendation

A state incentive program should be established to encourage school districts to employ more instructional aides in kindergarten and primary classrooms.

NUMBER OF KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS PER BUILDING

Kindergarten teachers frequently express frustration over the fact that they have no other kindergarten teachers in their buildings with whom they can share ideas and concerns and do joint planning. According to the present survey, 60 percent of the elementary schools employ only one kindergarten teacher. Twenty-eight percent employ two kindergarten teachers and only three percent employ more than three.

Recommendation

In order to meet the needs of kindergarten and primary teachers for collegial support, Oregon policymakers should consider establishing incentives for districts to facilitate joint planning and for support and planning groups among teachers. More co-operative planning and teaching by kindergarten and other primary grade teachers needs to be encouraged at the state, district, and building levels.

KINDERGARTEN SCHEDULES

The typical kindergarten class meets 2.25-3 hours per day, five days a week. However, 19 schools (3%) operate kindergartens for the full school day every day. Another 18 schools (3%) operate full-day alternate-day programs. Alternate day schedules vary somewhat, but most have children attend all day, two days a week, and half-days on a third day.

Nearly one-third of the kindergartens in the United States are full-day programs (Robison, 1985). The national trend toward offering more full-day kindergarten programs has apparently not yet reached Oregon. This may be due, in part, to the fact that kindergartens are relatively new in many Oregon school districts and state basic school support for kindergarten is based on one-half of the full-time reimbursement rate for grades 1-12.

Research on full-day, everyday, and full-day, alternate-day kindergarten programs indicates there is no negative effect of

these schedules on kindergarten-age children. In fact, children in full-day, every-day programs tend to score as well or better on achievement tests and they have equally or more positive attitudes toward school (Illinois Board of Education, 1985, and Hills, 1985). These positive research findings, coupled with increased needs for child care, will likely increase future demands for full-day kindergarten programs.

Recommendations

1. Current law allows school districts to receive state basic school support for kindergarten children at only half the rate of older children. This is done based on the assumption that kindergarten programs operate only half day. Oregon law (ORS 327.006(1)) should be changed so school districts may receive state basic support for kindergarten children who attend school for the full day at the same level as older children who attend the full school day. Such a change would make it possible for more districts to offer full-day kindergarten programs, thus giving families more options for their children.
2. The Department of Education should maintain current lists of schools operating full-day kindergarten programs and should make technical assistance available to schools that are considering full-day schedules.

HOME VISITS, PARENT/TEACHER CONFERENCES AND PARENT VOLUNTEERS

Early childhood educators have, for decades, promoted close working relationships between schools and parents (Hymes, 1973).

The State Board has recognized the value of parent/school interaction by providing for it in the Oregon Administrative Rules. Parent/teacher conferences and home visits may be included as instructional time (OAR 581-22-503) and, therefore, may apply toward the minimum number of days and hours required by the state.

1. Home Visits

Home visits, parent/teacher conferences, use of parent volunteers, as well as ongoing informal contact between home and school, can all contribute to closer relationships between parents and schools. One important way to foster better working relationships with parents has been for teachers to visit parents in their homes. In fact, when kindergartens were first introduced in the United States, home visitations were considered a crucial component of the program. As public schools took on the responsibility for kindergarten, home visits were gradually replaced by less frequent parent/teacher conferences in the school (Feeney, 1979).

A small number of Oregon elementary schools (39) conduct regular home visits with parents of kindergarten children. The number of days devoted to the visits ranges from one to fourteen. The average number of days devoted to home visits is four. Fewer schools (15) conduct home visits with parents of first grade children. Those that do conduct such visits spend an average of four days for them.

2. Parent/Teacher Conferences

Virtually all schools conduct in-school parent/teacher conferences with parents of kindergarten and first grade children. The average number of days devoted to parent/teacher conferences is four.

As more administrators become aware of OAR 581-22-503, they may increase the amount of time devoted to conferences and home visits.

3. Classroom Volunteers

The vast majority of kindergarten teachers (86%) and first grade teachers (87%) encourage parents to volunteer in their classrooms. This indicates that these teachers recognize the benefits of involving parents in the classroom. Research clearly confirms the benefits. Parental involvement in their children's education has a very positive and long lasting effect on

children's self-concepts, attitudes toward school, motivation to learn, and school achievement (Cotton and Savard, 1982).

Recommendations

1. The Department of Education needs to better inform districts of the regulations regarding parent/teacher conferences and instructional time so that district policymakers fully understand that conferences may be considered as part of the instructional time.
2. Department of Education staff should work with teacher educators and early childhood specialists to better inform teachers and principals of the importance of parent/teacher conferences and home visits and how to conduct them effectively.
3. Incentives need to be established to assist school districts in funding increased teacher time for home visits.
4. Additional research is needed to determine (1) the extent of parental involvement, (2) the nature of the involvement, and (3) the purpose(s) of involvement. It is not known what parents do when they volunteer in classrooms or the extent to which they affect their child's schoolwork and progress outside of the classroom. We have no idea of the extent to which parents are involved in meaningful decisions that affect their children's education and/or the operation of the school.

EARLY ENTRANCE POLICIES

One of the more controversial issues surrounding kindergartens has to do with allowing early entrance for some students who do not meet the minimum age requirement. Oregon law states that children must reach their fifth birthday on or before September 1 in order to be eligible for kindergarten (ORS 339.115 (2)). However, the law allows local districts to enter children early if they are "academically, physically, and socially ready."

The notion of "readiness for school" has received considerable criticism in recent years (Meisels, 1989; Bredekamp and Shepard, 1989). All children of any age are capable of benefitting from appropriately stimulating environments. Therefore, the question to be asked is not "When are children ready," but rather, "When is the state willing to provide free public education; i.e., a state-supported stimulating environment?"

Oregon policymakers could decide to provide free public education to children at birth, age one, or any age, although, certainly, education for an infant would not resemble kindergarten or first grade. The Oregon legislature has set the age of five and the date of September 1 for providing such services. Unfortunately, the educational concept of "school readiness" is often confused with the political decision of when to provide free public education.

There is no research to indicate that a developmentally-advanced child will be harmed by not entering early. All children are "ready" for school in some sense and the schools need to adjust to meet the needs of children rather than expecting all children to "fit" the same predetermined school program. Nevertheless, 336 (62%) of the schools responding to this survey provide for some form of early entrance. Two hundred and five (38%) of the schools do not.

Recommendations

1. Oregon law (ORS 339.115 (2)) should be changed so that early entrance based on "readiness" is no longer allowed.
2. The Department of Education should better inform district officials and state policymakers of the problems with the concept of school readiness.
3. The state must establish more programs for special needs children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are preschool age.

RETENTION AND TRANSITION CLASSROOMS

In an attempt to meet individual student needs, many schools have created transition classrooms between kindergarten and first grade for students who have completed kindergarten but are considered likely to have difficulty in first grade. Transition classrooms typically have fewer students than regular classrooms and they combine the less formal, play-oriented experiences of kindergarten with the more formal academic instruction often required in first grade. In theory, some students should be able to move from the transition classroom to second grade, but in practice, this seldom occurs. The vast majority of children placed in transition classrooms go to first grade the following year. Therefore, transition programs are considered by many to be another form of grade retention (Gredler, 1984; Smith and Shepard, 1987).

A growing body of research (Koons, 1977; Cryan, 1985; and Smith and Shepard, 1987) indicates that retention in kindergarten and first grade has more negative than positive effects. Studies with control groups consistently show that, on average, at-risk students who are promoted with their peers achieve equally or higher than similar at-risk students who are retained. Research on transition classrooms is no more positive (Gredler, 1984).

Since retention is not effective for most children who are having difficulty in school, alternatives must be established. Smith and Shepard (1987) outline a number of possibilities. In addition, the recent report from NASBE (1988) suggests the establishment of "nongraded primary units" as one way of addressing developmental needs of all young children and avoiding the need for some children to be retained.

In spite of the negative research on retention and transition classrooms, 128 schools indicated having transition classrooms. A follow-up survey of these schools is being conducted in order to gain more information regarding the nature of the programs.

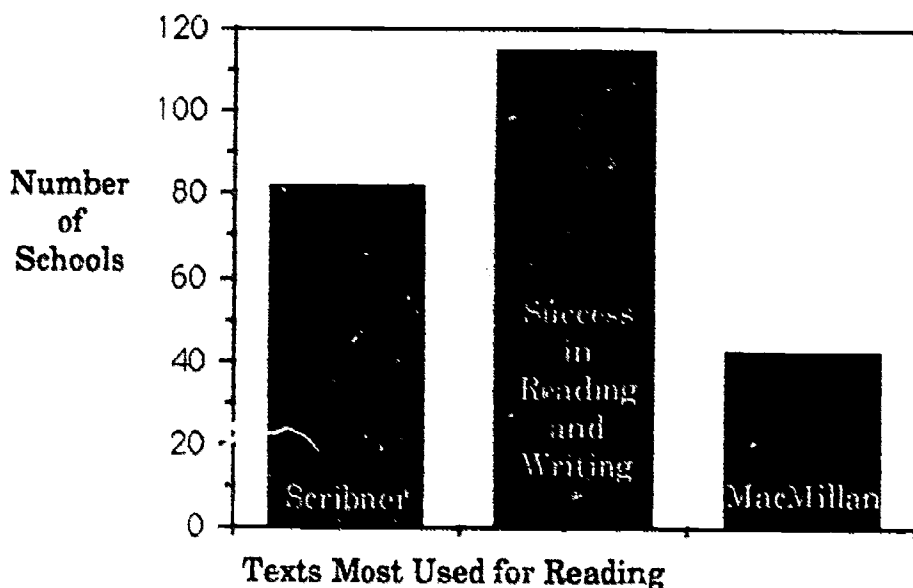
Recommendations

1. The Department of Education should assist districts in developing alternatives to retention such as tutoring programs, extended day and summer programs.
2. The Department of Education should promote the development of alternatives to traditional grade level structures. Alternates should be piloted in various areas of the state.
3. The Department should assist districts in communicating retention issues to parents.

TEXTBOOKS

State law (ORS 337.120) requires school districts to "select textbooks and other instructional materials for each grade and subject field from the multiple choice approved list." The term "textbook" is meant to cover more than just books. It may be defined as "any organized system which constitutes the major instructional vehicle for a given course of study." (*Procedure for Seeking Approval of Independent Textbook Adoptions*, ODE.) Sets or kits of print and nonprint materials are acceptable although few have been adopted by the Textbook Adoption Commission.

The 549 schools that responded to the survey and that have kindergarten in their buildings were asked to list which textbooks, if any, were used with their kindergarten children. Two hundred and forty-one of the schools (44%) listed themselves as using no textbooks (6% of the schools listed one text and 8% reported two). A follow-up sampling of schools listing no texts was done to determine more precisely what this answer meant. This sampling found that the vast majority of these schools did intend to convey that their kindergarten program does not rely on standard textbooks or workbooks and is not paper-and-pencil task-dominated. Several described their program as "active" or "developmental." *Success in Reading and Writing and Math Their Way* were mentioned as being used by many schools in the follow-up sample. These programs had not been seen by them as textbooks and therefore had not been listed on the survey.

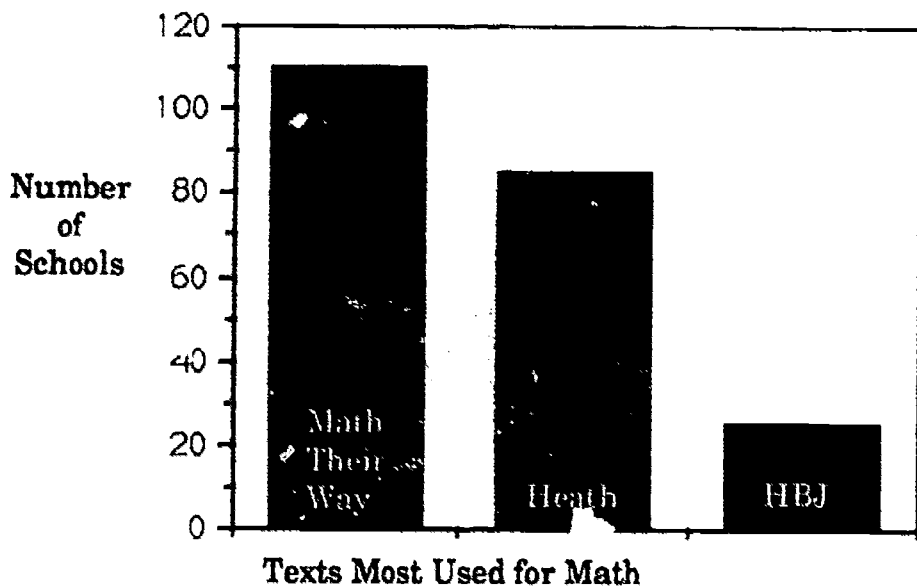


* Includes schools reporting they do not use texts.

Although Scribner was the reading text most often reported on the survey form (82 or 15% of schools with kindergartens), a conservative estimate based on the follow-up sample indicates that 25 percent of the districts not listing texts actually use *Success in Reading and Writing* as a part of their curriculum. Including this group means that approximately 115 or 21 percent of the schools are using *Success*, making it the most widely used program.

The number and variety of reading approaches used are striking. Twenty-six different programs were listed as reading texts used in kindergarten programs. Nearly 11 percent of the schools reported using two or more reading texts in their kindergarten classes.





Math Their Way, used by 110 (20%) of the schools, was the most frequently listed math program. In addition, the follow-up sample indicates that it is widely used in the schools not listing texts; a conservative estimate is 50 percent of these schools. Including these groups means that *Math Their Way* is used in at least 230 (42%) of the schools with kindergartens.

OTHER CURRICULUM AREAS

Seventeen percent of the schools with kindergartens report using a penmanship text. Of these, the overwhelming choice is Scott Foresman D'Nealian. Thirteen percent of the schools listed a social studies text; of these, the programs by Heath and Holt are the texts most selected. Science texts are used in 13 percent of the kindergartens. Silver Burdett is most widely used, followed by SCIIS. Seven percent of the schools reported using a health text and only 2.4 percent reported a music text.

State law (ORS 337.120) requires school districts to "select textbooks and other instructional materials for each grade and subject field from the multiple choice approved list." In spite of this mandate, the survey indicates that the majority of kindergartens do not use textbooks from the state adopted list.

The decision of districts to avoid state adopted textbooks in kindergarten is likely due, at least in part, to the influence of recommendations from respected early childhood education organizations, such as the Association for Childhood Education International and the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Both of these organizations have, for many years, urged teachers of young children to use hands-on, manipulative materials instead of abstract workbooks and similar items. There is, then, a large discrepancy between recommendations of leading national and state early childhood educators and the current textbook adoption policies of the state.

In addition, it could be argued that current State Board policy on kindergarten also conflicts with textbook adoption policies. The kindergarten policy recently adopted by the State Board calls for the use of activity centers and opportunities for children to engage in learning experiences with real objects. It specifically states that "kindergarten-age children learn best by engaging in hands-on manipulative activities. . ." In addition, position papers published by the Department of Education strongly discourage the use of workbooks in kindergarten.

"Workbooks, ditto sheets, and other similarly abstract materials commonly used in upper grades have very limited value in kindergarten classrooms. Young children learn much more from interacting with blocks, puzzles, sand, and other materials that are a part of planned, concrete learning activities." (*Issues and Answers: Kindergarten in Oregon*, 1987)

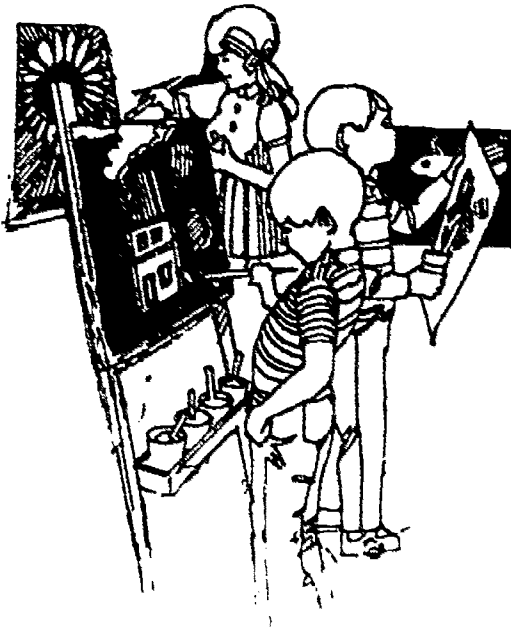
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The adoptions of the Textbook Adoption Commission for kindergarten have been almost entirely workbook oriented. Consequently, many districts feel compelled to purchase textbooks

(i.e., workbooks) adopted by the commission, in spite of recommendations to do otherwise from the State Board, Department of Education, and national early childhood organizations.

Recommendation

A State Board of Education task force needs to be established to reconcile the apparent discrepancies within current policies and between those of the Board and the Textbook Adoption Commission. School districts must receive more consistent messages regarding the purchase and use of textbooks for young children.



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